

Assistant Secretary Robert O. Blake, Jr.

Press Availability

Dhaka, Bangladesh

December 11, 2012

Assistant Secretary Blake: Thank you, Viraj. It's nice to see all of you so early in the morning. Thank you very much for coming.

It's a pleasure to be back in Dhaka today. As Viraj says, I'll make a few opening remarks and then I'll be happy to take some of your questions.

As Secretary Clinton noted when she was here in May, our countries enjoy a strong friendship that goes back decades, rooted in our shared democratic values, our strong economic ties, and our deep people-to-people connections.

This September we were very pleased to hold the inaugural session of the U.S.-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue in Washington, where we discussed important issues of mutual concern including development, civil society, trade and investment, science and technology, and countering violent extremism. Bangladesh has been a vital partner on counterterrorism and bilateral military efforts.

I had several priorities on this trip. First, I was honored to participate in the South Asian Women's Entrepreneurship Symposium that ended yesterday in Dhaka. This Symposium brought together over 100 key women policy makers, entrepreneurs, and civil society representatives from 10 countries in the region to work on concrete actions to expand women's economic participation.

The action plan developed here in Dhaka will be used to identify additional investments aimed at promoting women's entrepreneurship and contributing to regional economic growth, peace, and stability.

As Secretary Clinton recently said, we believe every woman should have the opportunity to contribute to the economy and society where she lives. At this Symposium, the women of Bangladesh and the region affirmed that belief and pledged to make it a reality.

Bangladesh was a natural host for this gathering because it is an example for the whole world of the positive impact of a vibrant civil society. The world has been especially inspired by the work of BRAC and Grameen Bank, which have unleashed the potential of millions of women in Bangladesh and around the world to not only improve their own livelihoods but also contribute to long-lasting economic growth in their communities and their countries.

We have also long noted our strong support for a timely and transparent selection of a highly qualified Managing Director who will ensure the continued integrity and effectiveness of Grameen Bank as an institution, and who will ensure that the interests of all the shareholders, particularly women, are protected.

In that same spirit, we are working with the government of Bangladesh to improve labor conditions. In meetings with the government, manufacturers, and buyers, I expressed our condolences for the devastating fire at the Tazreen factory.

Just over a century ago in New York City, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 146 American workers and galvanized public support for stronger worker protections and the institutions and oversight to enforce those rights. That fire was a turning point for American workers.

In my meetings here in Bangladesh I emphasized our hope that Tazreen can be a similar transformative opportunity for Bangladesh to sign on to a Better Work program with the International Labor Organization and the International Finance Corporation, also allow independent labor unions to be formed, make durable changes to improve workers' safety, and sign a Trade and Investment

Cooperation Framework Agreement with the United States. These actions will help Bangladesh brand itself as a country committed to worker rights and worker safety, and thereby help your country to attract new investments in its garment and other sectors.

A last focus of my trip was the opportunity for regional integration. On the eastern frontier of the New Silk Road, Bangladesh is demonstrating leadership in developing constructive relationships with its neighbors, working with them to resolve long-standing and complex issues, and developing new areas of mutual cooperation. After reaching important agreements on boundary issues, Bangladesh doubled exports to India over the past year.

As Burma opens its borders and markets, Bangladesh has made helpful offers of expertise and access to support Burma's emergence on the global economic stage. The United States welcomes these steps towards greater regional connectivity and economic integration. Everyone stands to benefit when ideas, goods, and people move more freely and efficiently across borders.

The people of Bangladesh are some of the most dynamic and innovative the world has had the privilege to know. Their energy in tackling both the challenges and the opportunities facing your nation is an inspiration to so many around the world, and the United States looks forward to continuing to broaden and deepen our friendship and our partnership with Bangladesh.

I'd also just like to take a moment to thank Ambassador Mozena who is doing such a fine job with his great team here in Dhaka to represent our interests.

With that, I'd be happy to take a few questions.

Press: A very good morning to you.

Your arrival to this country was marked by a country-wide blockade that experienced quite a few dead and your departure is being marked by a country-wide general strike, hartal. What do you have to say about it?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I think I'll go back to what Secretary Clinton said about hartals, which is that they have a very harmful effect. They have a very harmful effect first on the poor people of Bangladesh who rely on daily wages to sustain themselves and to sustain their families, but they also have a deeper harmful effect on Bangladesh's reputation and on Bangladesh's efforts to try to attract new investment. Investors like to see predictability and a safe and easy working environment. Hartals are obviously a very difficult problem for businesses. So in general, I think that both of the parties should avoid hartals and instead try to resolve their differences peacefully and try to resolve their differences in parliament which is where these debates should take place.

Press: Mr. Blake, this is Raheed Ejaz from Prothom Alo. You are visiting our country while the country witness the road blockade as well as hartal and day before yesterday we have witnessed departure of several lives as well as hundreds of injuries. While last night you meet with [Begum Zia]. After meeting you the BNP leaders mentioned that you expressed your concern about the arrest of the Acting Secretary General of BNP.

Do you feel that this sort of incident, shrinking the space between the political parties to narrow down their differences and of the general election? The first part of the question. And if --

Assistant Secretary Blake: Let me take one question at a time.

Press: That is related to --

Assistant Secretary Blake: Let me just take one question at a time.

First of all with respect to the arrest of the Secretary General, it's inaccurate to say that I expressed concern. I said that this is a matter for the Bangladesh judiciary to consider and obviously we hope that his constitutional rights will be respected.

But more broadly, I did express concern about the violence, and I did strongly condemn the violence and the killing of the three people that took place. I was particularly horrified to see today on the front pages of many of your newspapers the pictures of the young man who was beaten to death, and I hope that the perpetrators of that violence will be brought to swift justice in accordance with the Bangladeshi constitution.

Press: Bashir Ahmed from Amar Desh. As you are aware that particular [inaudible] of ICT has taken the instruction from the third person to write the judgment. At the same time, a senior judge of the appellate division here in Bangladesh has offered the same judge to promote him in return of giving judgement the accused of crimes against humanity in this December. In this, what is your observation regarding the independence of judiciary here in Bangladesh? Thank you very much.

Assistant Secretary Blake: Thank you for that question. I can't comment on some of the specifics that have appeared in the Bangladeshi press because I just haven't seen all of the information. But I think you know very well the position of the United States with respect to your war crimes tribunal, and that is that we have urged the government of Bangladesh to ensure that the tribunal fully respects due process under Bangladeshi law, and that it support a credible, independent, transparent process to bring perpetrators to justice in accordance with international standards of law.

Press: My name is Masuf Farim, I work for the Shomokal local newspaper. Actually, to this political situation is mainly based on the head of the general election parliamentary election, and there are main dispute about how the election process will be, how the election will be conducted, whether the

caretaker government will conduct or the ruling party will conduct. This is the difference. So how do you think this can be solved? If this can be solved then maybe the political situation might be improved.

Assistant Secretary Blake: Our view with respect to the conduct of the election is that this is a matter that the Awami League and the BNP should resolve together. We call for a dialogue between the two parties to figure out a way forward and whatever they can agree on I'm sure will be acceptable to the international community.

Press: Despite your good wishes, the ground situation gets a different look and many conscious citizens of Bangladesh are apprehending that if the violence on the street continues there might be possibility of state of emergency or the military rule as it happened in 1997.

What would be U.S. position regarding the state of emergency or the return of military rule in Bangladesh?

Assistant Secretary Blake: I don't want to comment on hypothetical situations, but let me say what I said earlier which is that we view with great concern these hartals and we view with great concern the deepening cycle of violence here in Bangladesh. We urge the parties to resolve their differences peacefully and through peaceful dialogue.

Press: Excellency, my name is Saiful, I work for the BSS News Agency. I have a question regarding the New Silk Road. We know that it didn't include Iran, Russia and China, so how far your New Silk Road program will be successful without involving these three important countries?

Assistant Secretary Blake: The purpose of the New Silk Road, first of all, is to try to help support the very important transition that will be occurring in Afghanistan in 2014 where the United States and many of the NATO allies will be pulling substantial numbers of their forces out of

Afghanistan, but also as a result of that there will be less military spending in Afghanistan. So it's very very important to establish a more private sector-based and more trade-based economy in Afghanistan, and the way to do that is to embed Afghanistan economically into its regional neighborhood by developing the roads, the railway networks, the electricity transmission lines and the gas pipelines that can help to knit this region together.

So all of the countries of the region have a very important role to play by helping to open up their markets, by helping to build this infrastructure, and by supporting this vision of regional integration.

Bangladesh is one of the largest markets in the region, and also has a very important role to play, not only in helping to support Afghanistan where it is in the process of opening an embassy, but also in supporting regional integration to the east. We now have a very important opportunity afforded by the opening up of Burma. We see an excellent chance to further grow the markets between South Asia and Southeast Asia, and between Bangladesh and China, particularly Kunming. Bangladesh is right in the middle of all of those trade routes, so your country will have a very important role to play. We look forward to working closely with your government to see that vision succeed.

Press: Good morning. This is Mainul Alum with the Daily Ittefaq, a Bangla daily. Since you are mentioning the dialogue, but there is no sign of dialogue. There is no attempt of dialogue. We see the parliament is not functioning, opposition is boycotting Election Commission that is also being boycotted.

How do you apprehend the situation in coming days, as Bangladesh is approaching the election this year? And finally, would you update about the latest situation, latest discussion on TICFA.

Assistant Secretary Blake: With respect to your question on dialogue, again, that is going to be up to the parties. But I think we strongly support the resumption of dialogue. We support the BNP returning to parliament to participate in passing the laws that need to be passed in your legislature. And so again, I would encourage both parties to resolve their differences peacefully and through dialogue.

With respect to your question on the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement, we are very close to an agreement and the final text is in the hands of the government of Bangladesh to sign. We hope that the government will do so very quickly, because this is a very important opportunity. Our trade is expanding very rapidly. Our own exports here doubled to Bangladesh in the last year, and we are your largest market and your largest investor. So it is certainly in Bangladesh's interest to have this dialogue about how we can further strengthen trade and investment and how we can remove whatever impediments now exist to furthering trade and investment.

So we hope that can be done on a very expeditious basis. And as I said in my opening remarks, the signing of a Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement would also send a very positive message on the labor front as well and would be one of several steps that I outlined on the labor front that would help Bangladesh to show that it is committed to improving worker conditions here and worker safety and worker rights. That also will have a very positive impact in the United States.

Again, I want to thank you all very much for coming. It's nice to see you all again. I look forward to visiting again very soon. Thank you.